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ABSTRACT

In contrast to overly cognitive and excessively reductive information models of communication, Hans Georg Gadamer provides a viable alternative for discussing conversation. There seems to be a competition in Gadamer's writings between conversation and text, so that his project of textual interpretation has an important impact on his treatment of conversation, perhaps to the point of subversion. How the substance of a text is understood is the domain of conversation, a secondary concern for Gadamer, and his concern for texts leads his discussion in some important ways. Although he acknowledges that tradition often occurs in conversational forms, Gadamer always prefers the written text. Gadamer's textual bias can be viewed at times as problematic and too radical, and his prejudice against psychological hermeneutics may unnecessarily eliminate other processes and types of interpretation. Thus, Gadamer's understanding of conversation as interpretive may be seriously constrained by these prejudices. Still, the philosophy of language presented by Gadamer is a welcome alternative, and it is not essential that a theorist embrace his view of text as a higher priority to accept that philosophy. In fact, development of Gadamer's views might best be undertaken by communications scholars, particularly by those interested in the discursive accomplishment of all forms of understanding. (HB)

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Problems inherent in applying Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics to the study of conversation

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When I first began reading Gadamer, I was impressed by the unique ways he provides to talk about conversation. Having been dissatisfied for some time by overly cognitive and excessively reductive information models of communication, Gadamer appeared to provide a viable alternative. His concept of play, for example, illustrates how conversation is more than the transmission of data from one organism to another. His emphasis on dialogue makes the process human. And Gadamer's ontological argument for the primacy of linguisticality not only legitimates our field, but also highlights the ethical dimensions of human communication.

As I have continued my study of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, his work has grown increasingly problematic for my interests. As I would struggle to understand his intricate accounts of conversation and linguisticality, I kept experiencing a frustration: Namely, just as the ideas would begin to coalesce into the shape of what one might label an understanding, the ground would shift. There seems to be a competition in Gadamer's writings between conversation and text. Gadamer's larger project is the interpretation of tradition bearing texts. His path takes him to language where he then walks the terrain of conversation. At the juncture between conversation and text there is a sort of intellectual fault line sending tremors through both lands, or so it seems. In other words, I have come to believe that Gadamer's project of textual interpretation has an important impact on his treatment of conversation, perhaps to the degree of subversion.

Gadamer makes it quite clear that it is "written texts [which] provide the real hermeneutical task," because through written texts "a past humanity itself becomes present to us in its general relation to the world" (1989, p. 390). Clearly Gadamer sees writing as parasitic on conversation; but, writing, for him, is special. Writing "raises" language into the "public sphere of meaning" such that "the meaning of what is spoken exists purely for itself, completely detached from all emotional elements of expression and communication" (p. 392). In this sense, writing suffers an alienation from speech, yet is also purified of the distortions of speech. Thus Gadamer makes his task the interpretation of written texts, and argues that the "first aspect" of the relation between language and understanding is that the object of understanding is "of a

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verbal nature" (p. 395). The second aspect is that all understanding is linguistic; that is, conversational. So Gadamer's chosen object of study is the "substantive understanding" (p. 384) of tradition bearing written texts. HOW one understands the substance of a text is the domain of conversation, which is a secondary concern for Gadamer. His project, or the subject matter of his writings, I believe, leads his discussions in interesting and important ways.

Here I will discuss how I see this occurring, first in some subtle ways, and then more explicitly when Gadamer discusses Die Sache, or the subject matter of conversation. Then I'll discuss how I think scholars might usefully proceed given these observations.

There are, first, some subtle ways Gadamer is led by his concern for texts. Obviously, he is led to focus on tradition as almost exclusively written. Even though he acknowledges that tradition often occurs in the forms of legends and myths communicated orally (p. 463), Gadamer always prefers the written text. More significant, Gadamer's writings display a tendency to explicate even his ideas about conversation in textually biased ways. For example, his discussions of translation are limited to the verbal level, that is, "We can even say that the translation is the culmination of the interpretation that the translator has made of the words given" (p. 384). His treatment of this extreme instance of interpretation appears ambivalent to his own observation that "The spoken word interprets itself to an astonishing degree, by the manner of speaking, the tone of voice, the tempo...," that is, the nonverbal, oral components of human communication (p. 393). At other times, Gadamer switches from an oral to a written phenomenon mid-sentence. For example, he writes: "Thus it is literally more correct to say that language speaks us, rather than that we speak it, so that, for example the time at which a text was written can be determined more exactly from its linguistic usage than from its author" (p. 463, emphasis added). This apparent rush on Gadamer's part to move from the spokenness of language to written texts seems to pervade his writings. Finally, when he discusses the "speculative" nature of language, Gadamer turns to written poetry to explicate this concept.

Gadamer's position that "Writing has the methodological advantage of presenting the hermeneutical problem in all its purity, detached from everything psychological" (p. 392) seems to undergird his entire project. The implicit assumption here that oral speech is somehow polluted by psychological forces is perhaps too radical.

There is an additional, more substantive respect in which Gadamer's textual bias can be problematic for communication scholars. Here the problem lies in a specific concept, which Gadamer labels Die Sache, or the subject matter of conversation. In his treatment of the nature of conversation, Gadamer argues that the subject matter is determinative. That is, every conversation is about

something and in many ways is led by that topic. This is an important argument. The rule of the subject matter moves us away from cognitive, psychological and homocentric treatments of conversation. The power of Die Sache provides a way to talk about the experience of being "caught up" in a conversation and of being surprised by its outcome.

Yet, conversational understanding for Gadamer is purely substantive. Even his distinction between authentic and inauthentic understanding rests on the question of Die Sache. He states that "Where a person is concerned with the other as an individuality--e.g., in a therapeutic conversation or the interrogation of a man accused of a crime--this is not really a situation in which two people are trying to come to an understanding" (p. 385); that is, when we attempt to understand another person (as opposed to what the person says), "the questions asked in such a conversation are marked by...inauthenticity" (p. 385n).

If all understanding is linguistic, as Gadamer maintains, and if we also agree that conversation is the primordial event of language, it seems we ought to consider any understanding and not limit ourselves to an understanding of the topic. Gadamer seems to acknowledge that other interpretations occur, for example, about the person, but I have difficulty in accepting Gadamer's premise that any nonsubstantive understanding will necessarily be imbued by psychology. Further, it seems that even the explicit topic of conversation could well be influenced by the psychological forces Gadamer seeks to avoid.

I am not arguing for a psychological hermeneutics. Instead, it seems to me, that perhaps Gadamer's prejudice for written texts and against psychology may be unnecessarily eliminating other processes and types of understanding from consideration. For example, it seems one ought to be able to examine relationship and cultural interpretations as they occur in conversation without these being explicit topics and without resorting to psychology. Indeed numerous scholars could be cited as exemplary of just such research (here I'm thinking of folks like Gerry Philipsen, Donal Carbaugh, Leslie Baxter, and of course the wnrk of my colleagues here).

Further, and perhaps more significantly, I am concerned that Gadamer's understanding of conversation as interpretive may be seriously constrained by these two prejudices. His analysis of conversation is notably abstract, and devoid of any specific characterization of the event of understanding and linguisticality making hermeneutics a difficult perspective to apply to actual discourse.

Given these conclusions the question remains whether Gadamer's perspective still holds relevance for scholars interested in conversational phenomena. Clearly, the philosophy of language presented by Gadamer is a welcome alternative, and it does not appear that one must view text as a higher priority to accept that philosophy. Indeed, it is when Gadamer most directly works to characterize language

that he moves away from texts and toward conversation. For scholars who are interested in texts and substantive interpretation, it seems advisable to recognize that Gadamer's hermeneutics might be limited by an incomplete treatment of conversation. Finally, it is important to note that a development of Gadamer's views might best be undertaken by communication scholars, particularly those interested in the discursive accomplishment of all forms of understanding, including such matters as personal identity, relationships, organizations, and cultures. The development of a more specific framework of conversational interpretive practices might well alleviate at least some of the tremors I have experienced in traversing Gadamer's hermeneutical territory.